

Sulphur Springs Methodist Campground
Sulphur Springs road
Jonesboro vicinity (Sulphur Springs)
Washington County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-209

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SULPHUR SPRINGS METHODIST CAMPGROUND

HABS No. TN-209

Location: Sulphur Springs Road, north 2.1 miles from Tennessee Highway #81, north of Jonesboro, (Sulphur Springs), Washington County, Tennessee.

Present Owner and Occupant: Sulphur Springs Methodist Church.
Reverend Virgill Booher, Pastor.
Route #2, Jonesboro, (Sulphur Springs), Tennessee.

Present Use: Camp Meeting shed.

Significance: Sulphur Springs Methodist Campground was founded following the Great Revival of 1800. First meeting here may have been as early as 1815. In 1842 temporary brush arbors were abandoned for a more permanent structural complex. The present shed as well as the other buildings (now extinct) were reconstructed with the same materials in 1900. The religious and social phenomenon of the camp meeting was an important communicative vehicle for backwoods families. The result is evidenced by the large variety of Protestant sects and the particular brand of Protestant Christianity practiced in certain areas of the Southeastern United States. The simplicity and naturalness of the shed's open air construction and the electric spaciousness of its interior volume reflect the personality of the spirit and event that created it.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1900.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

Washington County Deed Book 24, p.214, 9/19/1842 Payne Squibb William Milburn, et al, for \$100.00. Five acres "in trust that they shall erect and build or cause to be erected and built there on a house or place of worship for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America."---"with a reserve from the first of last

January to the School Commissioners of free schools in the State of Tennessee and in the 14th District of Washington County, with privilege for the term of twenty years, from the first of January last, to occupy a house on the premises for the benefit of free schools in the aforesaid district."

4. Original plans and construction: The pre-1900 shed was of similar plan and shape. The present shed is only larger. It utilized many of the hand hewn timbers of the previous shed, and constructed with mortise-and-tenon and pinned joints. New materials were gathered from local natural sources and worked by local craftsmen. The roof was originally shake. Cabins flanked the shed on the north and south. A dormitory sat opposite on the east. There were also a preacher's cabin and livery stable. The entire complex was surrounded by a four foot rail fence. Oil was the source of light.
5. Alterations and Additions:
 1. 1900 - Dormitory rebuilt (extinct).
 2. 8/16/1914 - L.H. Shipley paid \$157.73 for building a preacher's camp (extinct). Lumber was supplied from Bob Walker.
 3. 1915 - Stairway, two doors and two windows added.
 4. 10/2/1915 - John Kennerly paid \$300 to build 32' x 52' livery stable (extinct).
 5. 8/25/1919 - Preacher's camp remodeled and kitchen and dining room built (extinct).
 6. 3/23/1925 - Shake roof replaced by galvanized iron by Jack Nelson.
 7. 1940 - Water foundations built.
 8. 7/9/1946 - M.D. Banner paid \$25 for painting shed roof.
- B. Historical Context: Sulphur Springs was first visited by Indians who came to drink the healing waters. Many unnatural holes in surrounding rock outcroppings attest to their grinding corn and habitation. An abundance of water was a prerequisite for any camp meeting and the healing sulphur water was an added attraction.

Some say camp meetings began here as early as 1815, but others claim 1818 or 1820. Few records attest to the pre-20th century history of the meetings at Sulphur Springs but the few that do exist only illustrate how similar the circumstances, events and physical expressions of the religious and social occasion was to other camp meetings.

All of the over-the-mountain country was included in the Western Conference of the Methodist Church until 1812. Then the Western Conference was divided and the Holston Country became a part of the Tennessee Conference. In 1824 East Tennessee became a separate conference and was named the Holston Conference, which held its first meeting in the "White House" (Governor William Blount Mansion, extant) on East Hill Avenue in Knoxville in 1824. The Holston Conference Sesquicentennial 1824-1974 says "Camp meetings were held all over Holston in 1824. They usually began in July and the last of them would meet toward the end of September. Reverend John Tevis, Presiding Elder of Abingdon District, wrote for the Methodist Magazine, published in New York, a glowing account of the camp meetings in 1823. He mentions that those held in Lee County, Virginia (Jonesville), New River, Abingdon, Jonesboro (held September 19) where 200 joined the church, and, last for the year, at Carter Valley." The meeting mentioned at Jonesboro could have been either at Brush Creek, Telford, or Sulphur Springs.

In 1842 the camp meeting at Sulphur Springs began to institutionalize. Payne Squibb sold the Reverend William Milburn and his deacons the property where the camp shed now sits provided that a permanent structure be erected. It is likely that previous structures were merely temporary brush arbors built each year for the annual meeting.

Reverend Milburn is noted for being one of the outstanding preachers in this section of the south in his day. As a circuit rider he would have to ride long distances on horseback to meet his appointments which were many. He was probably the first preacher to preach in the original Sulphur Springs meeting shed. Later he became a chaplain in the Union Army. He was born in 1797 and died in 1877.

The first notice of the Sulphur Springs encampment was in the Jonesboro Whig in 1844. "We are requested to say that camp meeting at Sulphur Springs in this county will commence on the 6th of September, 1844."

In 1850 the Railway Journal (Jonesboro) reported "these, indeed, were years of great spiritual prosperity in Holston. Reverend George Ekin attended a camp meeting near Jonesboro in the Holston District where 202 persons joined the church, and one held near Rutledge at which 74 were added to the church. During this remarkable season of grace a number of wealthy and respectable people joined the Methodist Church, from the general down to the poorest African."

The Jonesboro Herald and Tribune, in 1874, gave notice to the annual camp meeting at Sulphur Springs: "Camp meetings - camp meeting at Sulphur Springs will commence on the 10th of September next. Families wishing to remain on the ground can secure a camp by making application to the committee. Ministers and members of other churches are respectfully invited to be present and participate in the exercise."

The camp meeting was an annual religious occasion but in the earliest years its most important function was as a social occasion. The church members exchanged greetings with each other, and they usually talked about the sermon, the year's crops, and business deals. Such an occasion took on added dimensions when it is realized just how isolated early settlers were.

People would come in their wagons or bring tents, and would bring their stoves and kitchen wares. Early meetings would frequently last for ten days. It would not be wrong to interpret the camp meeting as one form of 19th century vacationing.

To provide for the number of people was not easy. A directing committee was established to carry on the business of the camp meeting. One record notes that G. W. Price was paid for bringing water to the shed in barrels and that John Keep was appointed to manage the dormitory. Two hundred chickens and six 1,000 pounds beef cattle were killed over the two week period to feed the people. A ten cent admission charge was frequently the cost of entry. Hawking was a constant problem. Lemonade, watermelon, and ice cream vendors were frequent even in this century. The camp meeting committee barred all peddling within a one mile limit for several years, and once paid the dormitory managers \$15 for not selling ice cream.

During the months that there were no droughts the grounds were used as pasture and the preacher's cabin rented out for \$2.50 per month. The hotel served as a boarding house for the local girls academy.

In 1921 the present church at Sulphur Springs was built. With the ease of transportation via automobile those who attended the meetings usually drove home at night. In the 1920's and 1930's overnight camping became increasingly unpopular. In time the camping facilities were discarded leaving only the shed. Its only change has been the addition of a galvanized tin roof in 1925 by Jack Nelson to replace the original shake roof. Electric lights have replaced the oil and globe lamps. Meetings still occurred annually and often for as long in duration, but the end of the camping era transformed the meeting into what is known today as the church revival.

The Sulphur Springs Campground is one of a few vestigial remainders of a social and religious phenomenon which established the first institution preceding even those of government in the newly settled regions west of the Appalachians. It was also an institution comparable only to the plantation socials of ante-bellum years, and the vacation lands of the 20th century. Its purpose was religious but its drive was emotionalism and its result is a peculiar brand of Protestant Christianity practiced only by Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and other low-church sects in the Southeastern United States.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The one-story, rectangular-shaped structure measures approximately 40' x 70'. It is 3 bays wide and 6 bays deep. The gable-on-hipped roof utilizes a hewn-and-pegged timber truss system. Floor plan consists of an open air nave and a stage. Pews are of simple unfinished planks. The floor is packed earth and sawdust.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interviews:

Interview with Mr. Houston Carder - Church Member, Route #7, Jonesboro, Tennessee.

Interview with Mr. Clyde Galloway - Elderly Citizen, Route #7, Jonesboro, Tennessee.

Interview with Mrs. Ethel Templeton - Elderly Citizen, Route #7, Jonesboro, Tennessee.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

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(Place and address of repository not noted.)

Sulphur Springs Meeting Church Campground Committee
Minutes. Route #7, Jonesboro, (Sulphur Springs), Tennessee.

"Brief History of the Sulphur Springs Meeting Campground" -
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Mr. Houston Carder.

2. Secondary and published sources:

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8/17/41, 7/26/42.

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Volume IV, p. 57.

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Guide to Methodist Historic Shrines and other points of
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"The Camp Meeting in the Early Life and Literature of the Mid-
West" by Robert L. Shurter, East Tennessee Historical Society
Magazine. #5-6, Jan. 1933, pp.142-149.

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Historic American
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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1974 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the East Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the paper was prepared by Joseph L. Herndon, HABS Historian for the project.

The paper was reviewed and edited in the Spring of 1986 by Susan McCown, HABS Architectural Historian, for transmittal to the Library of Congress. The photographs of the structure were taken February 1983 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS Staff Photographer.